



Conference Brief

Strategic Studies Institute

*U.S. Army War College, and
Indiana University*

INDIANA UNIVERSITY

U.S.-INDIA SECURITY TIES

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Key Insights:

- India, as an emerging global power, increasingly is focused on issues that transcend the traditional South Asian region. U.S. policy, though, still tends to view India and its interests through precisely such a lens. Among the most important future developments will be the “de-hyphenation” of India from the rest of South Asia, and specifically Pakistan.
- Indo-U.S. relations have clearly improved in the post-Cold War era, particularly in the area of military-to-military operations. This can provide an important platform from which relations in other fields can advance.
- While relations between India and the United States have doubtlessly improved, the war on terrorism presents a series of obstacles to realizing fully the potential of the Indo-U.S. relationship, despite common interest in a number of key areas. This is likely to be the case as long as Pakistan remains the key regional ally of the United States.

On April 21-23, 2005, the India Studies Program at Indiana University hosted a conference aimed at assessing the current state of Indo-U.S. relations. More than 20 scholars, policymakers, and military leaders attended the conference, and provided a number of viewpoints on the evolution of the relationship between the two countries. In particular, conference attendees focused on issues pertaining to strategic cooperation and questioned whether we are, in fact, witnessing the convergence of grand strategies between two states that have traditionally maintained tenuous security links.

Opening remarks set the tone for the remaining sessions of the conference by highlighting a dominant theme that would temper future discussions among participants. Specifically, most members of the world community have tended to assume that India’s interests are limited to the South Asian region, despite obvious signs that India is emerging as a global power. Efforts on the part of New Delhi to move beyond the simple view that Indian politics are determined by its relationship with its neighbors, and more specifically with Pakistan, have both complicated previously held assumptions about India on the part of foreign powers and unnecessarily constrained Indian policymakers as they attempt to develop their state’s economic and political potentials. Hence, the tensions that have often accompanied Indo-U.S. relations are as much a

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result of both countries' worldviews as they are the consequence of divergent geo-political objectives.

The opening session of the conference provided an overview of the developing strategic relationship between the United States and India. At root, the first presenter argued that India's status as the world's largest democracy and the U.S. position as the world's oldest and most powerful democratic state have little to do with Indo-U.S. relations. Rather, he contended that strategic factors have played the dominant role in determining the course of relations, and that there were several "lost opportunities" for cooperation in the 1940s and 1950s that tempered future discussions between the two countries. To a great extent, these lost opportunities were the consequence of Cold War calculations and historical exigencies that caused U.S. policymakers to eschew India's professed status as a nonaligned state. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, these dynamics were largely eliminated. Nevertheless, the first presenter (and subsequent commentators) focused on two other issues that continue to bedevil bilateral relations: India's possession of nuclear weapons, and the role of Pakistan. Consistent with the overarching theme, both of these issues tend to keep India confined in the minds of American policymakers as a mere cog in a South Asian puzzle, rather than as an emerging global power with considerable economic potential, a large and technologically advanced military, and a blossoming space program.

At least three of the commentators agreed that, despite these historical differences, we are witnessing a "turning point" in Indo-U.S. relations, marked by India's advances in these areas coupled with what one observer termed a convergence of interest in the area of "anti-Jihadism." The potential for future joint action and the question of whether the two states can find common ground in their respective geo-strategic plans formed the basis for the remaining sessions.

From Military-to-Military to Peacekeeping.

Building on the initial comments, presenters in the next session focused on military-to-military relations and agreed that the post-Cold War era presented opportunities for cooperation that were historically impossible, owing to persistent U.S. support for Pakistan from 1954 onward and the

perception in Washington that India's professed neutrality masked sympathies for the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. General Claude Kicklighter's 1991 visit to India, and subsequent agreements to develop joint training exercises, marked the first military-to-military cooperation between the United States and India. In 1995, cooperation was further strengthened by Secretary of Defense William Perry's visit to India, where he and his Indian counterpart agreed to move beyond bilateral military issues to encompass a wide range of military, security and strategic interests. These advances were imperiled by India's 1998 nuclear tests and the subsequent sanctions imposed by the United States. But the foundation for cooperation remains, owing in large part to both countries' desire to remain positively engaged, as exemplified by the Jaswant Singh—Strobe Talbott dialogues.

Conference attendees noted that the new security environment after September 11, 2001 (9/11), with its attendant issues such as drug and arms trafficking, terrorism, and insurgency, requires a plan that moves beyond unilateral or even bilateral approaches. At least one commentator noted that this presents a sterling opportunity to advance Indo-U.S. relations by emphasizing India's role in the global, as opposed to the South Asian, polity. Such an effort at "de-hyphenating" India from Pakistan, while important from the perspective of India, might be complicated by divergent views of strategic culture. Several commentators suggested that while military-to-military relations have paved the way for future relations, Indian attitudes towards the deployment of force, coupled with its unwillingness to imperil its strategic autonomy, may require that we move beyond a military relationship and "embed military relations into a broader bilateral relationship" that is predicated on what one panelist termed "intangible" activities. Few panelists agreed on what these intangible factors would consist of, but they generally agreed with the sentiment that it was critical for Indo-U.S. relations to be characterized by something more than "engagement for engagement's sake."

The next three sessions highlighted the ways that this evolution can take place. In the context of global peacekeeping operations, the post-9/11 security environment has highlighted the importance of both human security and political stability as necessary ingredients to stop insurgencies that can foster

terrorism. To this end, both India and the United States are in a position to contribute to peacekeeping missions, although contributors diverged in their assessments of force readiness to accomplish these goals. In particular, the question of whether the U.S. military will soon be in a position to make peace and stability operations a viable component of its mission must still be answered. Nevertheless, at least one commentator noted that the overarching visions of both Washington and New Delhi are not inconsistent in terms of peacekeeping operations and that both states must readily concede that their long-term security is, in part, tied to the stability of other nations where new security threats can develop.

Dual Use Technologies.

In terms of strategic trade, contributors noted that while India considers the issue of high-technology trade, particularly in the area of dual-use technologies, to be a critical measure of Indo-U.S. security relations, the United States necessarily is constrained by its fears of potentially escalating nuclear tensions on the subcontinent. At the same time, one presenter argued that, despite the imposition of sanctions following India's 1998 nuclear tests, the legislation enforcing these measures began to crumble almost instantly as new laws providing a series of sweeping exemptions from the Glenn Amendment were passed quickly. While these exemptions and the September 2001 lifting of sanctions represented a tremendous change in strategic trade, dual-use technologies were still off the board. This presents a considerable problem for both political and economic reasons. First, U.S. refusal to budge on the issue hinders Indo-U.S. relations to the extent that India perceives Washington's willingness to concede to strategic trade as a critical barometer of its trust in New Delhi. Second, as the presenter noted, India's domestic civil nuclear program has reached a plateau that is unlikely to be breached without an infusion of foreign technologies. Ironically, the presenter observes that while India's nuclear program will likely remain at its present level, its missile/space programs continue to advance unabated, a development of less concern since "it is organizationally much easier to separate the civilian and military (missile/space) programs, not least because they are run by two different

institutions." India will continue to be rankled by the withholding of dual-use technologies although this frustration will be tempered by the elimination of key sanctions, coupled with the development of routine bilateral consultations. Thus, at least one contributor suggested that while limitations on strategic trade may prevent the two states from becoming the "natural allies" that many feel they should be, it is certain that there will never be full-fledged enmity between them.

Counterterrorism Cooperation.

The third area where Indo-U.S. relations can advance beyond bilateral military cooperation is counterterrorism. Clearly, both countries have a vital interest in limiting the scope of international terror. The 9/11 attacks on the United States and the December 2001 attacks in India reflect a common interest in minimizing the threat posed by organized terror groups. Prior to 9/11, U.S. policymakers tended to view terrorism solely as a "threat to U.S. interests abroad." To this end, the United States was unwilling to list Pakistan as a state sponsor of terrorism. As noted by several participants, the refusal to sanction Islamabad appropriately for its blatant support of terror groups operating on Indian soil was viewed as hypocritical by Indian policymakers. From the U.S. perspective, however, the long history of "tit-for-tat" strikes between India and Pakistan over the Kashmir issue reduced interservice intelligence (ISI)-sponsored attacks to a product of bilateral tensions as opposed to a case of international terrorism. The U.S. relationship with Pakistan in the weeks and months following 9/11 was a source of considerable consternation to India, although, as one participant argued, the distaste associated with U.S. cooperation with Pakistan was ameliorated by U.S. insistence that Pakistani militants operating in Kashmir were engaging in international terrorism. Moreover, in light of common threats, both the United States and India have engaged in joint counterinsurgency exercises and information sharing.

Despite some participants' optimistic outlook on Indo-U.S. cooperation in the realm of counterterror, at least one panelist argued that there will continue to be inconsistencies between the stated objectives of the war on terror and U.S. policies towards Pakistan. According to this perspective, the Bush

administration's second term will focus on three key foreign policy goals: the continuation of the war on terror, the prevention of future attacks of the caliber of 9/11, and the denuclearization of Iran. For each of these goals, the cooperation of Pakistan will be more critical than that of New Delhi. Hence, this panelist questioned the degree to which Indian and U.S. goals will dovetail. While the overarching goals of both states are similar, wide disagreements about how to best implement them exist.

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Toward a U.S.-India Entente?

Ultimately, Indo-U.S. relations can be best characterized as improving within a rapidly changing global polity. The last commentator described the current relationship as an "evolving entente," capturing the present state as an informal set of shared understandings between two powerful countries with many common interests. While the present relationship is certainly not an alliance, it represents a vast improvement over years past where a combination of geo-political differences and Cold-War realities conspired to create an atmosphere of significant tension between both states. Most panelists agreed that Indo-U.S. relations are at a high point, particularly in terms of military-to-military operations. At the same time, several commentators stressed the fact that U.S. policymakers are only beginning to see India as an emerging global power whose interests extend beyond the South Asian region. One panelist noted that this has as much to do with bureaucratic inertia than any other factor, and that many U.S. policymakers are strong advocates of "de-hyphenating" India and Pakistan. At the same time, this caveat must still be considered in the long-term U.S. interest in the war on terror. Given the reality of on-going tensions between New Delhi and Islamabad, as well as the continuing importance of Pakistan to U.S. counterterrorism efforts, Washington is unlikely to realize the full potential of the U.S.-India security relationship, at least in the near- to mid-term.

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